

## *Response to Commentators: ‘Does Comparative Philosophy Have a Fusion Future?’\**

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*Mark Siderits, Michael Nylan and Martin Verhoeven were invited to respond to Michael Levine’s discussion paper ‘Does Comparative Philosophy Have a Fusion Future?’ This paper documents Levine’s reply to their responses.*

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### 1

Professor Siderits begins his response with the following: “Faced with what looks like a wilful misreading, though, I usually remain silent. But Michael Levine’s misrepresentations seem so egregious that when a presumably reputable journal chooses to publish them I feel compelled to try to set the record straight. Levine accuses me of seeing little or no need to engage in the formidable task of trying to understand another philosophical tradition” (Siderits 2016: 128). Siderits not only claims I have egregiously and wilfully misread him but also attributes to me the claim that he sees “little or no need to engage in the formidable task of trying to understand another philosophical tradition.” Having reread my own essay, I categorically deny the first claim and can find no support whatsoever for the second.

What I do claim, with both an explanation of and with reference to, among other things, his discussion of Nyāya metaphysics is that “Siderits [...] misconstrues and misrepresents comparative philosophy’s methodological concerns as well as their core objections to fusion philosophy” (Levine 2016: 225) At the same time I note that “none of this is meant to deny that at times the work of fusionists may be insightful. After all, the work of Siderits and other sophisticated fusionists may at times adhere to methods and standards that are consistent with comparativist concerns” (*ibid.*: 228).

Siderits claims that my essay is in fact so bad, that it may even call into question the reputation of the journal in which it is published! Nevertheless, Siderits also says “Like most philosophers, I welcome criticism of my work” (Siderits 2016: 128). This latter claim is false not only in general (criticism is not after all generally welcome), but also in Siderits’s case in particular. I certainly do not *feel* that he has welcomed my criticism. And though it may be another “egregious misreading,” I do not think his opening paragraph is “*welcoming*.”<sup>1</sup> I feel that Siderits is disingenuous. Instead of “constructive engagement” with my thesis, Siderits resorts to empty charges and name-calling. I am a member of “the Comparativist Correctness thought police,” one who “neatly suppresses evidence” because I do not cite sources in his

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footnotes. If Siderits's comments are an example of Buddhist "tough love," well let me tell you—it is tough. When one is as defensive and blind to content as Siderits is, there is generally good reason for it.

It is not just me that Siderits misrepresents, but comparativists as well—on several counts. As I said in the essay: Few comparative philosophers would agree with Siderits that "the point of the comparison has often seemed to be limited to bringing out similarities and differences that might be of interest to scholars of one or the other tradition." (They can agree that at times it may 'seem to be,' but they would deny that it is) (Levine 2016: 214). Perhaps, more importantly, he also misrepresents some fusion philosophers—trying instead to remake them in his own self-image. He misrepresents those who do ignore methodological constraints and criteria essential to good comparative work, and who are happy and willing to unreflectively (methodologically speaking) reach for a philosophical position "off the rack."

Siderits apparently thinks that the essay is all about him and whether he "needs to engage in the formidable task of trying to understand another philosophical tradition" (Siderits 2016: 128). But it is not. It is about comparative method and what constitutes adequate methods and standards of those engaging in comparative philosophy or comparative studies more broadly. Its concern is with the methods comparativists employ—criteria and standards. And it does so by focusing on the claim made by Siderits that fusion philosophy has superseded comparative philosophy. The essay also has a particular thesis. The thesis states that if and insofar as fusion philosophy has superseded comparative philosophy, then it has done so only to the extent that it has sufficiently attended to the traditional concerns of such comparativists—the various problems raised by cross-cultural analyses.

As I say in the essay: Siderits's strategy, and that of other fusionists, is to defend fusion philosophy by pointing out instances where comparativists' concerns about fusion philosophy are being met. But comparativists do not generally deny that their concerns may be met (and at times are met)—which is what comparative philosophy is meant to do and what comparativists may claim fusion philosophy often fails to do. What they claim, and what Siderits, Graham Priest, Bo Mou and others downplay, turn a blind eye to, or simply do not accept or understand, is that sometimes those concerns are not met. That sometimes—in fusion philosophy and comparative philosophy alike—there really is misapplication and misunderstanding of terms and concepts; a de-contextualization coupled with imaginative (wishful) transformation of meaning that amounts to equivocation, misappropriation and the like.

The essay addresses these questions. "Can fusion philosophy (or CECP) be philosophically productive and useful, without relying on methodological constraints that early comparativists often thought essential (e.g. contextualizing; considering a position or problem *in situ*; and at times, primary language capability)? There are the issues of (1) whether different traditions even try to solve the same problems, and (2) whether or not they understand these apparently identical problems in the same way" (Levine 2016: 213)

With his contentious claim that fusion philosophy has superseded comparative philosophy, along with his own comparative work and studies in Buddhism, Siderits has contributed (at times unwittingly) a great deal to those interested in studying and applying non-western thought to Western philosophy. It is regrettable that his response is contemptuous and that here at any rate, he is unwilling to consider the substantive methodological and philosophical issues that I must have succeeded in raising. Indeed, the imperious tone of Siderits's response suggests that my essay has at least had an iatrogenic effect (an "illness" or disorder inadvertently induced by the diagnosis or treatment—e.g. "I think you are depressed").<sup>2</sup> Even if, as Siderits seems to think, there is virtually nothing of value in my essay, there are things—unintended by Siderits—to be learned from his response.

## 2

In her opening paragraph, Michael Nylan gives an excellent account of just what the issue is between the claim that fusion philosophy has superseded comparative philosophy and my contention that “fusion philosophy both is and is not one form of comparative philosophy. It is one in form, insofar as it attempts ‘constructive engagement’ with one or more strains of thought found in other cultures outside the Western tradition [...]. At the same time, [some] fusion philosophy, unlike comparative philosophy, denies the utility of long training in non-Western cultures and sustained reflections upon methodological problems, resting content with isolating ideas from their embedded contexts” (Nylan, and Verhoeven 2016: 120).

If Nylan does not explicitly address Siderits’s claim that fusion philosophy has superseded comparative philosophy, she nevertheless does discuss the underlying (core) questions about comparative method. What constitutes adequate methods for cross-cultural and cross-historical comparisons and more generally, the study of the traditions of others? Questions that need to be addressed are not just how we should we go about it, but also what the significance of doing so is, as well as aspects of discerning criteria for getting it right. These are all questions that used to come under “methodology”—the study of method itself as it relates to doing comparative and historical study. And part of the claim of my essay is twofold: (i) it is to the credit of the early comparativists, and those who came after, that they appreciated the significance of methodology; and (ii) the fact that many of the methodological concerns of earlier comparativists have fallen by the wayside in some fusion philosophy is cause for concern. It *can* make for poor scholarship. Insofar as fusion philosophy ignores methodological concerns, it does not and cannot supersede (methodologically astute) comparative philosophy. Instead, it constitutes a throwback to the way things used to be done before methodological self-reflection—examining how to understand and treat the “other”—was regarded as important.

Nylan and Verhoeven appear to agree. They say, “For many reasons, we worry about the dangers of ignoring the historical settings for pronouncements in the early literature, while glossing over the implications of vocabulary nuances and changes within a given culture [...]. We regard knowing a language to be a necessary, if hardly sufficient condition for deep engagement with a text” (*ibid.*: 120) While I believe I made the same or similar point regarding the importance of language capability when studying a tradition—I think it more important to make the point that doing comparative work does not always require knowing the language(s) of the texts one is studying. It is not even necessary for good comparative work or for “deep engagement with a text” (*ibid.*).

I think, for example, that one can engage deeply with Kant’s philosophy and even Rilke’s poetry (poetry, like philosophy is a special case) without reading German, and with Plato’s *Dialogues* without reading ancient Greek. Whether or not and the extent to which such comparative study does require primary language capability—and it would be foolish to deny that it often does, capability depends on the nature of the study. It is not simply that comparative and non-western studies would suffer greatly if it simply insisted on primary language capacity. Who would one teach? Must one learn Chinese, Sanskrit and Japanese?) It is that for some purposes such ability is not needed. Thank goodness for good translators and translations. (Questions about what constitutes a good translation will likely reiterate some of the issues concerning comparative philosophy. See Foran 2012.<sup>3</sup>) Oxford long ago gave up requiring students to read Plato’s *Republic* in Greek. In a somewhat similar vein, Harvard’s music department recently abandoned the requirement that music majors be able to read musical notation. This is presumably not to say that first violinists should not read music, or that knowledge of musical notation is not required for studying or comparing various permutations, or aspects of performances, of Schubert’s Notturmo in E-flat major.

I doubt Nylan and Verhoeven would disagree—well not wholly. As Nylan says, “Can we assume, even after years of arduous study, that such texts are ever ‘sufficiently well understood’ [...] as to be easily accessible and therefore ripe for exploitation?” (Nylan and Verhoeven 2016: 121)

She adds,

Fusion philosophers generally see themselves as ‘broadening’ analytic or Continental philosophy. Hence their propensity to equate the central task of modern philosophy with ‘problem-solving,’ with the problems tending to be very narrowly centered on problems generated within European language contexts heavily inflected with Christian theological terms or Kantian metaphysics. [...] Meanwhile, many smart philosophers today, inside or outside of comparative philosophy, would prefer to discuss ‘therapies for the soul’ or consider how we are to ‘know what to do,’ [...] ethical problems of longstanding interest to ‘lovers of wisdom.’ Frankly, we two authors are less enamored with ‘problem-solving,’ believing many of the central human problems, e.g., loneliness, old age, and death, to be incapable of ‘resolution’ (*ibid.*: 120).

The suggestion here is that fusion philosophy focuses on the wrong sort of thing—problem solving—and that is a mistake because the problems cannot be solved. Here I find myself on the side of some fusion philosophy. Why can’t philosophy both problem solve (it does and has in my view solved or made advances with regard to some problems and puzzles), and also cater to “lovers of wisdom?” Indeed, there are times when it cannot do one without the other. My difficulty with fusion philosophy is of course not that it tries to solve problems but with the ways in which *some* fusion philosophers go about it. They go about it like they are shopping at Macy’s. As Nylan says “A skeptic might argue that fusion philosophy risks becoming yet a new form of neocolonial extraction of resources (ideas and arguments) by the same group of philosophers who have, in the main, disdained non-Western ways of thinking as ‘not philosophy’ and ‘not rational’” (*ibid.*).

Nylan concludes “Thus, only sustained engagement with a body of materials outside the usual frame of reference is likely to spur any genuine rethinking of presuppositions, supplying a vantage point from which to begin to question the ‘regimes of truth’ [...] which modern nation-states, East and West, would foist upon all of us.” How far does fusion philosophy meet this demand and how does it go about meeting it—methodologically and practically speaking? Does it go about it in normatively justifiable ways?

My impression (which may be mistaken) is that Nylan’s view on adequate method in comparative studies (which is what my essay is about), is a combination of pragmatism and laissez-faire. Let’s see what works—and learn our languages and cultures/history in the meantime. I don’t think that comparative studies can be this latitudinous. What one learns and studies—what one concludes, as well as what one teaches—is, after all, itself a function of (infused with) method. Are there no more courses in comparative philosophical and historical methodology? How do those within a discipline but from different areas (let alone cross-disciplines) learn to talk to one another if not through such reflection?

Marty Verhoeven asks: “Does Philosophy Have a Buddhist Future?” (*ibid.*: 121) There is much I agree with in his characterization and account of Buddhism and Buddhist teaching. For example, “Dharma was never intended as an exposition of systematic thinking and reasoning on the nature of reality, existence, knowledge as such, but more as a make-shift raft to be dispensed with once its purpose of crossing over a dangerous river has been served” (*ibid.*: 122). However, there are also aspects I disagree with. I do not, for example, think that a “‘philosophical’ framing of Buddhism tends to presuppose [...] the Buddha was a systematic philosopher,” (*ibid.*: 121) nor need it do so.

And contrary to Verhoeven and much fusion philosophy, I do not think that such a framing requires one to downplay or ignore the soteriological aspects of Buddhism or its teaching about past lives and the like. And not only do I disagree with the claim that “the Buddha should not be read as a philosopher, nor be seen as such” (*ibid.*: 124), but I see a good deal of what Verhoeven himself says as conflicting with this claim. The difference of course rests with our differing conceptions of philosophy. Mine is less institutional, far broader and common-place (though not in contemporary academic than his, though it includes the idea that philosophy should influence one’s life or that life is itself a philosophical enterprise (in part).

Verhoeven does not engage directly with the question of whether comparative philosophy has a fusion future. And yet the tenor and direction of what he does say seems at least congenial to both my thesis and the concerns expressed about fusion philosophy. He says, “If the ‘prime objective of comparative philosophy [is] to learn from other philosophies and cultures and to take them on board, scrutinize and respectfully critique them, synthesize them, and even make them a part of one's own,’ we must ask how, exactly, we are we to learn *from* the other” (*ibid.*: 124) So I’m going to take it that he is on my side (though he may claim the “middle-way”)—or if not, it is not because I haven’t re-raised significant methodological issues.

**Michael P. Levine** is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Western Australia. He has taught at the University of Pennsylvania, Swarthmore College, the University of Virginia, and in Moscow as a Fulbright Fellow. Publications include *Pantheism: A Non-Theistic Concept of Deity*; *Prospects for an Ethics of Architecture* (co-authored with Bill Taylor); *Thinking Through Film* (with Damian Cox); *Politics Most Unusual* (with Damian Cox and Saul Newman); *Integrity and the Fragile Self* (with Damian Cox and Marguerite La Caze); and *Engineering and War: Ethics, Institutions, Alternatives* (with Ethan Blue and Dean Nieusma). Editor, *The Analytic Freud*; *The ‘Katrina Effect’: Reflections on a Disaster and Our Future* (with William Taylor et al); *Ethics and Leadership* (with Jacqueline Boaks). In 2014 he was a Senior Fellow at Durham University’s Institute of Advanced Study.

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- <sup>1</sup> See the “welcoming” exchange between Donahue and “the Cowherds” (2016). See Amy Donahue, “For the Cowherds: Coloniality and Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy,” *Philosophy East and West* 66, no. 2, (2016): 597–617; Cowherds, “Is Moonshadows Lunacy? The Cowherds Respond,” *Philosophy East and West* 66, no. 2, (2016): 617–21; Amy Donahue, “Reply to the Cowherds: Serious Philosophical Engagement with and for Whom?” *Philosophy East and West* 66, no. 2, (2016): 621–26.
  - <sup>2</sup> Also see: Jiri Benovsky, “The Self, Agency, and Responsibility: A Rejoinder to Siderits,” *Philosophy East and West* 67, no. 2, (2017) 558–64: forthcoming; Jiri Benovsky, “Buddhist Philosophy and the Non-Self View,” *Philosophy East and West* 67, no. 2, (2017): 545–53; Mark Siderits, “The Importance of ‘My’ Being Single. A Response To Jiri Benovsky,” *Philosophy East and West* 67, no. 2, (2017): 553–8.
  - <sup>3</sup> ed. Lisa Foran, *Translation and Philosophy* (Oxford, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Wien: Peter Lang, 2012).